DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 160 CS 509 247

AUTHOR Minch, Kevin M.

TITLE Redefining "Communication" for the Basic Course Student: Helping Undergraduates to Conceive of Computer Messages as Communication.

PUB DATE 20 Nov 95

NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (81st, San Antonio, TX, November 18-21, 1995).

PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Computer Mediated Communication; *Computer Uses in Education; Educational Change; Higher Education; *Introductory Courses; *Speech Communication; Speech Curriculum; Undergraduate Students

IDENTIFIERS *Communication Context; *Computer Users; Cyberspace; Electronic Media

ABSTRACT

In this pivotal time in the 20th-century electronic revolution, when electronic communication is becoming more widespread and affordable, it is certainly worth while to consider the implications that computer mediated communication has for the basic course student's understanding of the communication process. There is a growing need to address communication which takes place in cyberspace. Traditionally, the linear method, with communication taking place within a context having 3 dimensions--physical, psycho-social, and temporal--has been used to teach communications. There is no physical dimension, nor a sense of temporal relativity, in cyberspace. Even the psycho-social context is difficult to evaluate, given that messages are emotionless and text-driven and anonymity is prevalent. Educators need to convey to students the importance of and differences highlighted by computer mediated communication. Students should be encouraged to get e-mail accounts and to use e-mail to contact teachers about problems and set up special appointments. Instructors should also utilize examples of electronic communication to illustrate the steps in the communication process and expand upon discussions of timeframe and how it influences understanding of messages. Finally, everyone involved in the teaching of the basic speech course can emphasize the breadth of the communication process. Electronic communication further bends the definitions of some of the terms traditionally used to define communications and challenges teachers to broaden their horizons as educators in the field of speech. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 394 160

Redefining 'Communication' for the Basic Course Student: Helping Undergraduates to Conceive of Computer Messages as Communication

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Minch
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

by:

Kevin M. Minch
Wayne State University

Presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention
November 20, 1995
San Antonio, Texas

CS508247

Kevin Minch

SCA Basic Course Interest Group

November 20, 1995

Redefining 'Communication' for the Basic Course Student: Helping Undergraduates to Conceive of Computer Messages as Communication

In the first semester of my graduate career I was fortunate enough to be introduced to the world of computer mediated communication by a fellow graduate student. Prior to that time I had not sent an e-mail message, browsed the internet or performed anything more sophisticated than the most basic of library-based on-line searches. For me, the thought of instantly contacting a fellow student, educator or primary source for research with a keyboard and a modem was entirely foreign. While many of us working on the graduate level and in professional academe are becoming aware of the internet and its potential, many undergraduate students are only beginning to become exposed.

In this pivotal time in the twentieth century electronic revolution, when electronic communication is becoming more widespread and affordable, it is certainly worth while to consider the implications that computer mediated communication has for the basic course student's understanding of the communication process. As students become more aware of this new method of interpersonal communication, important advantages will develop and problems will be raised.

As electronic media has grown to dominate mass communication, scholars are struggling to grapple with the implications of a form of communication that provides optional anonymity and can constantly change or be modified by multiple sources. At the same time, many basic course

textbooks and instructors continue to define communication in terms of the traditional SMCR model. While this model is appropriate for the explanation of most human communication, there is a growing need to address communication which takes place in cyberspace. This paper addresses how the increasing importance of the internet in the lives of Americans is changing our traditional views of communication and is necessitating a new approach to teaching about the communication process.

In order to more fully understand this influence, this paper will explore the issue in several areas. First, some common approaches to defining and teaching the communication process will be discussed. Second, the potential changes in these conceptions--created by the introduction of computer mediated communication--will be examined. Finally, some recommendations will be offered as to potential curriculum adjustments that can be made to accommodate this new trend in learning, research and communication.

Traditional Conceptions and Teaching Methods

The dominance of the so-called linear model in the average basic course is nearly unquestionable. It is certainly fair to say that the model we have come to know as "linear" or "transactional" appears frequently in basic communication texts. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes in her text, The Rhetorical Act, "Every book addressed to students of communication begins with a model of the process that looks something like this: [In diagram form] Source - --> Message - --> Through channels amid noise - --> To receiver [who responds through channels amid noise]" (19). Take for example the Ross text which identifies the SMCR model: Source, Message, Channel, Receiver (11). The popular Gronbeck text uses a similar set of terms, discussing the roles of the speaker, the message, the listener, feedback, the channels, the situation

and the cultural context (6-13). Ross offers his own model--the Ross Communication Model--which offers a much more complex range of details, but is built on the same core, circular process of sending and receiving information via channels (13). The model's use is not limited to basic course texts either, as Charles Larson's widely used text Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility also offers the SMCR Model as a fundamental guide to understanding the communication process (11).

There are two things which are important to observe about the similarity in communication models used in today's popular texts. First, there is at least some support for the hypothesis that there is substantial use of the linear model of communication in today's basic course classroom. Second, there is a certain simplicity that comes with using this model of communication. Its wide acceptance facilitates at least basic discussion of the topics of communication, even if more complicated issues--such as methods of rhetorical criticism--remain contentious.

As a graduate student who has taught both the basic course and a course in persuasion, I find myself falling into the pattern of teaching the basic linear model. This does not mean, however, that this model need dominate my--or anyone else's--thinking on the subject of teaching communication. We have traditionally accepted this linear model and applied examples of verbal, non-verbal and written communication to illustrating it in the classroom. Yet the emergence of electronic communication has transformed the possible realms of discussion.

The Alterations of the Electronic World

Computer mediated communication brings with it new intellectual baggage. Among these questions are: How does anonymity influence the communication process? How is tone and emotion communicated through

text? How do graphics act symbolically to send a message? How is reality symbolically created by e-mail phenomena such as "signature files?" How does the alternation of time and space influence the communication process? These are all questions that can be dealt with in normal face-to-face, graphic or written communication. In essence, these questions are not new. What is new, however, is the way in which computer mediated communication illuminates the questions and adds complexity to the explanations.

Anonymity

Anonymity is the most fundamentally interesting issue involved in computer mediated communication. While in interpersonal and written communication one always has the option of concealing one's identity, there is still a limit that one can put on their distance from the recipient and their exposure to the results (or repercussions) of the message. Take the following message as an example from a internet newsgroup (alt.sex.bestiality.hamster.ducttape) in which a man anonymously named "O," describes a less than universally appealing act:

> What happens when your nice furry hamster lives through the ordeal through which you put him?? (sic) Do you rip off the duct tape, nurse him back to health and do it to him again when he is recovered, or just get all your money's worth in one day. (Internet).

While it is certainly possible that this person may have been entirely willing to discuss this topic in open conversation, the fact that the person took a lettered pseudonym would tend to suggest otherwise. The internet provides numerous options to conceal one's identity in e-mail and computer bulletin boards. This permits unfettered expression without consequences. One can be as raunchy or as personal as one likes without feeling threatened by the potential results. There is no threat of the mail or handwriting being

traced. No visual or oral contact takes place (unless the writer initiates it). The writer is only bound by those most basic human inhibitions and taboos that may prevent someone from acting even when consequences are absent.

Anonymity presents some important issues for the teaching of the communication process. The manner in which we encode information is effected by anonymity because we know very little about the sender and are in a position of helplessness when it comes to obtaining more information. The process of feedback is greatly affected as well. Because we know little about the person with whom we are communicating, and because the consequences of the communicative exchange are different, our responses as receivers may be different as well.

The message in cyberspace is confined to the text. Expression is confined solely to what appears on the screen. Such expression is limited and denies the receiver the ability to assess emotion, credibility and other personal details inherent in traditional interpersonal communication. Entire relationships have been known to exist within the confines of computer bulletin boards without the participants having much knowledge of the person on the other end (Rush Limbaugh was said to have met and "dated" his current wife for quite a while via the Internet). As Mitchell Kapor and John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontier Foundation explain, "Certainly, the old concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context, based as they are on physical manifestation, do not apply succinctly in a world where there can be none" (Barlow).

Tone and Emotion

Oral and written communication can portray tone and emotion much more efficiently than electronic communication. In oral, particularly face-to-face communication, factors such as facial expressions, tone of voice, use of

the eyes, choices in emphasis and timing of pauses can all be used to enhance or alter the meaning that the words alone portray. In written communication, while much less is known, factors such as handwriting and methods of presentation can create subtle yet important impressions.

In electronic communication, messages can be highly sterile. The nature of some e-mail software often constricts enhancements in presentation such as boldface and underlining. Voice and facial expression, of course, are absent. Thus, the forum of communication forces the participant to solely interpret tone or emotion based on text.

Some participants in the cybernetic world have found that it is possible to use graphics to communicate emotions. Even for individuals with a simple keyboard, one can communicate some things graphically. For instance, a writer might use one of the following:

:-) A smiley face on its side to indicate pleasure of happiness.

:-(A frowning face to portray the converse of the happy one.

;-) A winking face (using the semicolon) to portray sarcasm.

Other writers choose to use exclamation points more frequently or will type in all capital letters. Thus, a message typed in all capital letters could be interpreted as a screaming tirade. However, it could also be someone with a caps lock key that is stock in the locked position. So there is certainly potential for error that is not present in face-to-face communication.

A new set of standards for symbolic--or non-verbal--communication necessitates a new understanding among basic course students of the range of options available to communicators to portray feeling.

Signature Files

One technique that internet users currently employ to symbolically express themselves is the signature file. Many e-mail programs permit a user

to design a special file that signs their name, gives their address and offers a quotation of graphic that is self-expressive. These signature files attach themselves automatically to all out-going messages. These are the functional equivalent of having personalized stationary, placing a seal on a letter, or wearing an organization's lapel pin in public. They each send a descriptive message about the individual communicating without that person necessarily saying anything.

One individual, known by the nickname, "Sunwolf" and observed on the SCA student forum Comgrads, employs a signature file that calls for audience involvement. It first asks the reader to "Insert image of wolf, chasing foamy waves." Then a quotation is offered, "Happily ever after all depends on where you choose to end the story. ---> The Good Wolf." A working mail address follows (Sunwolf). Another individual, who's name I will conceal for the purposes of anonymity, offers a graphic of an inverted triangle--the accepted symbol for the gay community--and a quotation from D. Mustaine: "If I know I'm going crazy, I must not be insane." Doyle Srader, of the University of Georgia (the operator of the high school cross-examination debate listserv) has been know to sign his messages with "We are storming the battlements/Razing the arguments. Vigilantes of Love, Tempest" (Srader).

Each of these messages is a personal expression that helps to symbolically construct the personal reality that is the individual communicator's personality. What is important about these symbolic definitions, however, is that they may inaccurately portray the individual. because the writer of an e-mail message is unseen and unheard, it is difficult to discern the true person. The reader of an e-mail message must decode the information supplied in such cues as the signature file.

Time and Space Considerations

The problems of time and space are what acts most to turn the traditional linear notion of communication on its head when we enter the cybernetic world. Many persons participate in "listservs" or computer bulletin boards. In these forums an individual starts a conversation on a particular topic or directs a message to an individual. These lines of thought are often referred to as "threads." What is different about this mode of communication is that multiple participants in the forum can jump into a conversation prior to the message being received by the intending recipient. Thus, Person A can send a message on the computer bulletin board to Person B. However, if Person B does not log-on to their computer right away, Persons C, D, and E can intercept the message and comment on it. For example, in one instance onan internet newsline, a writer named "ARTMAN" chastised "Margo" for using the newsgroup as a place to post personals (Artman). Yet, his message, aimed at Margo, has been received (and even responded to) by individuals other than the intended receiver. As a result of the responses, the context of the message has changed. As reporter Katie Young recently noted, "For every person who posts a message on a board there are probably five to ten 'lurkers' quietly watching for fun" (Young 49). This system of open channels disrupts traditional notions of feedback and makes the linear model better expressed as three dimensional. It is almost like a "party-line" telephone system.

This interference is similar to but different than the concept of "noise" that we are familiar with in traditional discussions of the communication process. It is like noise in that it can interfere with, distort or completely transform a message's meaning. It is also unlike noise in that the interfering messages are received in their entirety. Such messages are taken at their face

value and are not extraneous information. Person B then can gleen an entirely different meaning from the initial message than was originally intended, because the comments of others can alter the context. This temporal issue poses potential questions about how the communication process is portrayed.

Conclusions

Clearly, there are notable differences in the types of communication exhibited by human beings in traditional settings and on the internet. Joseph A. Devito notes that communication always takes place within a context. He describes that context as having three dimensions, physical, psycho-social and temporal (DeVito 8). Only the psycho-social element can exist in the world of cyberspace. As Kapor and Barlow explained there is no physical dimension to the Internet, and while there are often time logs on computer messages, our sense of temporal relativity tends to get distorted when we observe hundreds of electronic messages in close proximity. Even the psycho-social context is difficult to evaluate given the fact that the messages are emotionless and text-driven and anonymity is prevalent.

Would it not be easier to teach these issues in a class on computer mediated communication? Certainly. But as students become more involved in the world of computers and electronic communication, they will be confronted with new communication concepts that we may not be conveying in the basic course. These issues may prove to be confusing. As a course of action, educators need to convey the importance of and differences highlighted by computer mediated communication.

First, teachers of the basic course need to encourage their students to get e-mail accounts. Many colleges and universities give these automatically. However, that does not mean that the average student takes advantage of this

service. Sadly, many institutions of higher learning do not yet have the capacity to offer all of their students free e-mail and internet services. Students should be encouraged to take advantage of services such as America On-Line, Prodigy, Genie and CompuServe--if they have the financial ability. If not, many communities now have so-called "Freenets" which make it possible to access the internet at a lower cost or no cost at all. An easy way to get students on to the internet is to offer them extra credit for sending you a simple e-mail message. My experience has been that students then begin to use the net to contact you with problems and set up special appointments. It tends to increase participation and experimentation.

Second, instructors should more frequently utilize examples of electronic communication to illustrate the steps in the communication process. Where an instructor might normally diagram a verbal conversation on the chalkboard showing the speaker, the listener, the channels, noise and feedback, it might also be useful to diagram the course of an e-mail message and show how its meaning can be altered through the presence of other related messages.

Third, teachers can expand upon discussions of timeframe and how it influences our understanding of messages. Similarly, the importance of context can be more thoroughly reinforced through discussions of how other messages and the choice of forum itself can influence the interpretation of meaning.

Finally, everyone involved in the teaching of the basic speech course can emphasize the breadth of the communication process. Too often we allow ourselves to fall into ruts when teaching this course. Sometimes public speaking style, methods of persuasion or communication theory end up becoming the dominating theme of a particular instructor's course.

Computer mediated communication provides us with fresh material that permits the illustration of a wide range of communication-related topics: non-verbal communication, context, symbolic construction of reality, anonymity and style.

It is entirely possible to imagine a future in which a substantial portion of our interpersonal communication is conducted through data ports and modems. We will become beings increasingly dependent on interpreting meaning solely from the typed or written word. When that day comes we must be prepared to interpret and understand the discourse we are presented with.

To say that electronic communication has greatly changed our world is an understatement. To say that it has radically changed our conception of communication would be too rash. What it has done is placed the normal interpersonal communication process on a screen where it can be held in place and dissected with great precision. It further bends the definitions of some of the terms we have traditional used to define communication. Consequently, these changes challenge us to broaden our horizons as educators in the field of speech.

Works Cited

Artman. "Hey Margo, up yours. . ." Newsline. Online. Internet. 5 Feb. 1995.

Barlow, John Perry and Mitchell Kapor. "Across the Electronic Frontier." Online. Internet. Electronic Frontier Foundation. 10 Feb. 1995.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. The Rhetorical Act. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996.

Devito, Joseph A. The Interpersonal Communication Book. New York: Harper and Row, 1989.

Gronbeck, Bruce, and Kathleen German. Principles of Speech Communication, 11th Brief Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Larson, Charles U. Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility, 7th Edition. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995.

O., Johnnie. "What happens when. . ." Online. Internet. 2 Feb, 1995.

Ross, Raymond S. Speech Communication: Fundamentals and Practice, 7th Edition. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986.

Srader, Doyle. "Re: Bomb Ad." Online. Internet. CX-L. 9 Aug. 1995.

Sunwolf. "Re: Small Group Exercises." Online. Internet. ComGrads. 1 Nov. 1995.

Young, Katie. "Investors in Cyberspace." Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine. Oct. 1994, 48-52.